

## CHAPTER TWO

---

# NONSTATE BORDERWORLDS

After riding on a small motorbike for almost half a day down a muddy track from the sleepy provincial capital of Dawei in southeastern Myanmar, I reached the site of a proposed deep-sea port midst white sand. The site had been designated for development into one of the largest industrial estates of the country as a special economic zone, including petrochemical facilities, automobile assemblage, a steel mill, and light industries. However, the Thai–Myanmar business conglomerate tasked with developing the special economic zone was encountering financial difficulties, and construction was temporarily suspended. Although no workers were in sight, a young government official was eagerly explaining the company’s plans to a small group of potential private investors from across the country.

I introduced myself to the official and told him what my university affiliation was. While the sight of a sweaty foreigner in the middle of nowhere seemed to puzzle the official initially, he quickly warmed to the idea of sharing his developmental aspirations with a European researcher from a university that, after all, goes by the name of the London School of Economics. Overlooking a half-finished highway that connects the site to Kanchanaburi in Thailand by slicing through dense forests, the government official explained that Myanmar’s location makes it a natural geopolitical partner for regional development. From his point of view, the only thing needed to transform the country’s far-flung, inaccessible borderlands into prosperous hubs of connectivity for the ever-increasing cross-border commerce was the construction of physical infrastructure.

The official’s narrative fits well with a currently popular understanding of Myanmar that portrays the impoverished country as Southeast Asia’s so-called last frontier economy. Among the country’s most valuable assets, this narrative holds, is its strategic location, sandwiched as it is between the region’s affluent economies of China, India, and Thailand. The historian and grandson of the former UN general secretary U Thant, Thant Myint-U, for instance, stresses the transformative powers of these “geo-economics” in his 2011 book *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia* thus: “When geography changes, old patterns of contact may disappear and new ones take hold, turning strangers into neighbors, and transforming backwaters into zones of strategic significance” (2011, 3).

Politicians’ grand visions recall long-standing historic imaginings of Myanmar’s geostrategic relevance, such as the Burma Road, built by the Allies during the Second World War as the “gateway to China” to supply Chinese nationalist troops fighting the Japanese (Deignan 1943). Such visions dovetail with current geopolitical strategies and worldviews in the region, including China’s “look south” strategy, India’s “look east” policy, and the Thai strategy toward its western neighbor as well as development policies of regional organizations like the Asian Development Bank. All of these aim at fostering commerce and regional economic integration by increasing connectivity through infrastructure construction to develop the Myanmar “land bridge” (Florento and Corpuz 2016, 215).